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Variation in Canadian French usage from the 18th to the 19th century

FRANCE MARTINEAU

Abstract

On the basis of private documents (letters, diaries), this article discusses the language use of Canadian French writers from different social classes from the beginning of the 18th century to the end of the 19th century. It first examines the relationship between the writers and the norm and their use of conservative and innovative features with regard to spelling and grammar. Next, it looks into the extent to which non-standard spelling use could be paralleled with vernacular use of morpho-syntactic features.

ne montre pas mon griffonage
jan ai honte moi-même

'Do not show my scribbles,
I am ashamed of them' (18th century)

There have been many studies on the 17th and 18th centuries French norm as imposed through grammars such as Vaugelas and Ménage's grammars and the Dictionnaire de l'Académie française (Ayres-Bennett 2004; Catach 2001). However, we know relatively little about the true usage that French writers of the lower and upper classes made of the language in their private correspondence from the 17th century to the 19th century.

Studying the usage of writers allows us to discover more about the state of a language at a certain period in time. However, since these documents are based on written language, they must be studied with regard to the difference between oral and written tradition. These writers reveal, through their use of the written language, some lexical, grammatical and phonetic features as well as their spelling strategies and the
relation they have with the norm. This article is chiefly concerned with this last aspect, the relation between the existing norm as we know it from prescriptive works, and the usage of writers from different social classes over two centuries, from the beginning of the 18th century to the end of the 19th century.

In the first section of this article, I will present the corpus on which this work is based as well as the problems I will be addressing. In section two, I will compare French Canadian writers’ use of conservative and of innovative features in the 18th and 19th centuries. Finally, in section three, I will examine how non-standard spelling use could be paralleled with vernacular use of morphosyntactic features.

Reconstructing the older states of a language

Aside from dictionaries, grammars and, written documents left by writers of the times are the only traces that can be used for reconstructing the older states of a language. The most easily accessible documents are literary or administrative texts. However, the language used in these texts is quite formal and has to be compared to other types of documents from the same period. Documents that are more private in nature give us a glimpse of another level of language. Research done on these types of documents is relatively rare, given the time investment needed to build such corpora (with sources often random and private letters not well identified in archives). For more than a decade, however, this area of research has been growing for English, German and Dutch with studies bearing mostly on social history or historical linguistics (Fairman 2002; Romaine 1988; Vandenbussche 2002; Vandenbussche, De Groof, Vanhecke and Willemsys 2004, among others). Compared to research on other languages, studies on European French have been rare (see Branca-Rosoff and Schneider 1994; Bruneton and Moroux 1997; Caron 1992; Chaurand 1989, 1992; Ernst and Wolf 2000) and texts are most often studied for their social/historical interest.

In order for these private documents (letters, diaries) to be useful for reconstructing older states of the French language, they must be organized according to modern sociolinguistic criteria. Without this internal organization, these documents remain fascinating witnesses of the language of the writer, but cannot be used to generalize on the language of that period. Since 1995, I have been building a corpus of vernacular French (Corpus de français familier ancien, Martineau 1995–2006), from correspondence between parents and friends and from account books, with the main objective being to understand the origin and evolution of Canadian French. My corpus contains over 1000 letters, twenty travel journals and ten account books, with the majority having been
transcribed (almost 15 million words). It is structured by date, by dialect, by social criteria and by type of text.

The corpus covers the period between the 17th century and the first oral sources in the middle of the 20th century. From a dialectal point of view, the documents come from the birthplaces of the first French settlers in Canada (Paris and the northwest region of France), from the first two French settlement areas in America (the St-Lawrence Valley and Acadia—the provinces of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island), and the areas to which the first settlers emigrated (Louisiana, New England, the Great Lakes, Western Canada, the Mississippi Valley and Missouri.) I have taken great care in distinguishing the origin of the document (where it was written) from the origin of the writer (where he or she was born). For example, a text written in Quebec by a writer from France would remain a document written in European French. I have also organized the corpus according to social groups. This classification was difficult, as the social hierarchy in New France and then French Canada was not as rigid as it was in Europe (Havard and Vidal 2003). Even within the French settlement areas, social class distinctions may be different. To avoid this problem, I decided to organize the writers by profession, with a special category for women.

Each writer’s profile includes his birthplace, his date of birth, his profession, and his mobility. Since the first wave of emigration to Canada was small (about 10,000 immigrants, according to Charbonneau and Guillemette 1994) and genealogical sources are well documented, this helps follow the lives of the writers even if they were not well known.

Finally, the documents were organized by type of text: letters, receipts, account books, personal diaries. Most of the documents are letters written to other members of the writers’ families, usually in a context of private or semi-private communication. Letters follow writing conventions just as much as literary texts, reports and account books (Grassi 1998). This is why the opening of the letters is usually a salutation similar to: Je vous aist crist cette Lettre pour vous faire asavoir de mes nousvelle qui sontres bonne dieu mersie, ‘I am writing you this letter to give you good news, thank God’ (1800). Even so, between the opening and closing expressions, the letter as a text type gives us examples of morphosyntactic structures which are much less rigid, especially when the letter is long and written by someone with little experience in the art of letter-writing.

Receipts are shorter texts, sometimes written by lower-class individuals. The disadvantage of a receipt is that, even if it is signed, it does not provide much linguistic information on the writer because it is so short. This is one of the reasons why I added the account books to the
corpus: their advantage is that traces of the writer’s identity remain, and they are of an adequate length.

The research of Juneau and Poirier (1973) has shown how account books are important documents for retracing lexical terms or dialectal and regional pronuncations. Account books also allow us to study many aspects of verbal morphology and highly lexicalized syntactic structures, such as the use of prepositions. However, structural elements such as arguments of the verb (subject and object), negation and modality (interrogation, imperative) are less frequent and are difficult to interpret because of the fixed syntax of account books.

I have integrated audio files dating from 1930 to 1960, including sociolinguistic interviews, traditional stories and songs. These documents allow us to bridge the gap between 19th century and 20th century French; they also, to a certain degree, serve as a point of comparison for the written documents (see Martineau 2005).

All of these written documents that serve to reconstruct an older language – be they literary, administrative, or private documents – are still merely traces of the state of an older language. Even an informal letter, written by an almost illiterate writer, must be approached as a written text, and not as spoken traces. We must remember that the prestige of the norm had an even greater impact on these written documents than on oral language. Without native speaker intuitions on the language, it is difficult to place these texts in the proper linguistic context.

Researchers are often surprised when they realize that many letters written between the 17th and 18th centuries, which, at first glance, seem to be distanced from the norm of the time, as in (1a), actually follow the rules of normative grammar, once spelling is standardized, as in (1b).

(1) a. Je soiteres pou voire vous
   En donner de marque de vive voi ce ce
   res une satisfaction des plus grande
   que Je pus Ja mes expéré (Madame de Lavaltrie, 1751)

   b. Je souhaiterais pouvoir vous en donner des marques de vive voix,
      ce serait une satisfaction des plus grandes que je pus jamais espérer.
      ‘I would like to be able to give you news in person, which would
      be an even greater satisfaction than I could ever hope for.’

Does this mean that these documents cannot tell us anything about vernacular grammar? What is the relationship between the individual as a writer and the same individual as a native speaker? Can we deduce the grammar of a speaker from a written text, or is the scrambling of the written code too much for us to learn about it this way?
This article will examine the relationship between the writer and the norm, with regard to spelling and grammar, and what this relationship reveals to us about these writers as speakers of a language. The importance given to spelling as a gauge of social status seems only to have increased during the 19th century in the majority of countries that had an increase in the literacy of their populations with urbanization and industrialization.

To understand the way literacy increase had an impact on writers, I have compared private documents from the 18th century to the 19th century. The documents come from French Canada, which is an interesting area to study given the relationship between France and its colonies in the establishment of a linguistic norm. A colony of France at the start, from 1534 to 1763, in contact with France but far from the main centres like Paris, French Canada was quite isolated from France after the British Conquest. My corpus consisted of texts chosen from the *Corpus de français familier ancien*. I selected more than one hundred letters between parents and friends, from writers belonging to the upper class (the ‘bourgeoisie’) to writers belonging to the lower classes, and three diaries. In total, 35 writers, all born in Canada, were selected. The documents were categorized according to the writers’ birthdates, instead of by the date they were written, in order to measure the impact of a changing norm on the years that the writers received formal education. For instance, two different people who wrote in 1880 may have received different educations depending on if they were born before or after 1840, which marked the middle of an important transition period which parallels the progression of literacy in Quebec (Verrette 2002).

Which norm to follow?

I first examined the linguistic choice of writers in a context of variation between conservative and innovative features. As Seguin (1972: 49) pointed out, referring to spelling in the 18th century, ‘The paradox is that the necessity to follow the spelling norm comes about before the norm itself has been fully defined. For this reason, the 18th century is a century of “spelling instability” […]’. How did the upper class react to this variation, being the group that was most exposed to the norm? Can we distinguish this upper class from a lower class simply by comparing the two groups’ spelling? Does conservatism with regard to spelling go hand in hand with a conservative use of morphosyntactic elements?

One of the spelling variants that has long been considered a characteristic of the older state of the French language is the *oi* spelling, found in certain people names (*françois*, *anglois* for French, English), in adjectives (*foible*, ‘weak’, and *mauvoir*, ‘bad’), in the inflection of the imperfect (*avois,
‘had’) and conditional tenses (’auront, ‘would have’) as well as in the root form of certain verbs (’paroître, ‘to seem’). The new variant, ai, was only approved by the Académie française in 1835, even if it was in variation with the older spelling all through the 18th century and used by printers, editors and certain authors such as Voltaire (Catach 2001: 307). In fact, the oi spelling had another variant, at least for verb inflection: e, as in avoisslaves. This spelling was put forward in the 17th century by grammarians such as Lesclache (1688) and Lartigaut (1669), who suggested replacing the older form, oï, by ê, which would be closer to the pronunciation and in keeping with inflectional morphemes (Biedermann-Pasques 1992: 155). According to Lesclache (1668: 23): ‘Nous devons donc écrire j’aimés, il aimét, je parlés, il parléet, ils parléent (‘We should write j’aimés, il aimét, je parlés, il parléet, ils parléent’). How was the spelling of writers affected by this variation (oi, e, ai) during the second half of the 18th century? Did they adhere to the innovative usage or did they stay attached to the existing norm imposed by the Académie?

As shown in Table 1, the majority of writers kept the old spelling for people names, except for two (writers 9 and 12). Most of our writers born in the first half of the 18th century were also conservative in their spelling, using oi or e in most cases instead of ai for the imperfect and the conditional. There was no progression of the innovative ai variant from 1700 to 1750, which corresponds to the period in which the writers were born. This means that most of the writers followed an older spelling; they chose either oi which was at the time the norm in the various editions of the Dictionnaire de l’Académie, from the first edition in 1694 to the four others that followed during the 18th century (the second in 1718, the third in 1740, the fourth in 1762 and the fifth in 1798) or e which was proposed at the very beginning of the 17th c. For instance, in contexts other than people names, some writers prefer e rather than oi as the conservative variant. In that context, frequency of use of e is 97.7 percent for writer 1 (vs 2.3 percent of oi); 100 percent for writer 2; 65 percent for writer 6 (vs 3.5 percent for oi); and 69.6 percent for writer 9.

In the same context, other writers prefer the oi variant; frequency of use of oi is 95.4 percent for writer 3 (vs 4.6 percent of e), 74.4 percent for writer 12 (vs 1.2 percent for e), 94.7 percent for writer 13 (vs 5.3 percent for e), 100 percent for writers 5, 7, 8, 14, 15, 16 and 17.

However, three writers (4, 10, 11) show a higher rate of use of the innovative variant ai (frequency of use of e is 10 percent for writer 10; for writer 4, frequency of use of e is 18.3 percent and frequency of use of oi is 13.6 percent). Can the use of the ai variant be paralleled to a social class distinction? This is what Dubois (2003) suggests for the use of the ai variant in France. In her study of how writers born in Louisiana or emigrated to Louisiana from France adhered to the spelling norm
Table 1. Rate of use of the innovative (ai) variant versus the conservative variants (oi or e) in writers born during the first half of the 18th century in the St-Lawrence Valley*.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writers and birthdateln</th>
<th>1 1696</th>
<th>2 1697</th>
<th>3 c.1700</th>
<th>4 c.1700</th>
<th>5 c.1704</th>
<th>6 1705</th>
<th>7 1707</th>
<th>8 1709</th>
<th>9 1722</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of ai in people names</td>
<td>0% (0/7)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0% (0/2)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0% (0/20)</td>
<td>0% (0/11)</td>
<td>(0/1)</td>
<td>87.5% (7/8)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of ai in contexts other than people names</td>
<td>0% (0/43)</td>
<td>0% (0/3)</td>
<td>0% (0/22)</td>
<td>68.1% (15/22)</td>
<td>0% (0/7)</td>
<td>31.5% (25/80)</td>
<td>0% (0/51)</td>
<td>0% (0/23)</td>
<td>30.4% (14/46)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writers and birthdateln</th>
<th>10 1727</th>
<th>11 c.1730</th>
<th>12 c.1730</th>
<th>13 1731</th>
<th>14 1733</th>
<th>15 1738</th>
<th>16 1740</th>
<th>17 1743</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% ai in people names</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>(1/1)</td>
<td>88.2% (15/17)</td>
<td>0% (0/7)</td>
<td>(0/1)</td>
<td>(0/1)</td>
<td>(5/5)</td>
<td>(0/3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of ai in contexts other than people names</td>
<td>90% (9/10)</td>
<td>100% (14/14)</td>
<td>24.4% (21/86)</td>
<td>0% (0/18)</td>
<td>0% (0/15)</td>
<td>0% (0/27)</td>
<td>0% (0/15)</td>
<td>0% (0/5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* No rate is given when there are fewer than five occurrences.

during the 18th and 19th centuries, Dubois showed that the upper class from France, born between 1685 and 1760, very rarely used the conservative spelling variants (only 36 percent of the time, on average) whereas immigrant farmers (77 percent) and merchants and military figures (78 percent) used them much more frequently. Dubois concluded that this difference was due to the fact that the two latter groups were less educated and thus less exposed to the new norm coming from Paris.

In Table 1, the writers belong to the class of merchants and military officers. In New France, social class distinction was less pronounced than in France; noblemen could therefore participate in the fur trade, and there were marriages between noble families and merchants (Gadoury 1998). Among our writers, three social groups can be identified although the social distinction is not very sharp: the merchants and militaries oc-
cupying the higher class, the merchants and militaries of a lower social status, and the wives of these merchants and militaries, either from higher or lower class. This distinction demonstrates an inverse relationship than the one found by Dubois, where the conservative variant was associated with the higher class. In (3), percentages are for the innovative *ai* variant:

(3)  

a. Merchants and militaries of a higher social status (writers 6, 8, 14, 15, 16, 17): 16.6 percent (25/150)  
b. Merchants and militaries of a lower social status (writers 2, 5, 7, 9, 10, 13): 17 percent (23/135)  
c. Wives of these militaries and merchants (writers 1, 3, 4, 11, 12): 26.7 percent (50/187)

These results must be examined carefully since there is sometimes a high level of variation within each group. In the group of women, for example, writer 11 used the innovative variant 100 percent of the time. If she is excluded from the group, the percentage falls to 20.8 percent, very close to the other two groups. In the second group, there is also some significant variation, from 0 percent to 100 percent, even between writers that are brothers, all of the same generation and all merchants (writers 10 and 13). However, the data still point in the same direction: the *oi* variant is well ingrained, probably even associated with the elite.

At first glance, the difference in the degree of exposure to the norm from Paris and the difference in education cannot explain why the *oi* has the upper hand in New France whereas the *ai* variant is in progression in France. Writer 14, François Baby, studied at the *collège des Jésuites* in Quebec and writer 15, Pierre Guy, first studied at the *Petit Séminaire* in Quebec but then in *La Rochelle*, France; both used the *oi* variant. Writer 16, who was born in the St-Lawrence Valley, was exiled to France in 1760, at the beginning of the Conquest. His last letters, written around 1817, were thus written when he was in regular contact with the usage in France; he still used *oi*.

This gap between the usage in France and the usage in New France is also visible in the use of grammatical variables. In the 18th century, the adverbs *pas* and *point* are in variation; they both appear in non partitive contexts where the verb is negated as in (4), and in contexts where the negation falls on the noun, as in (5):

(4) Non-partitive context: Je ne veux *pas/*point.  
(5) Partitive context: Je n'ai *pas/*point d'amis.
In Old and Middle French, the use of *pas* and *point* as adverbs was in complementary distribution, *pas* being used in non-partitive contexts and *point* in partitive contexts (Price 1997). But gradually, this difference faded and *pas* began to be used more broadly. In the 18th century, there was still variation between the two adverbs but the use of *pas* kept progressing in France as well as in New France. This progression was slightly more rapid in France than in New France, the latter having a higher percentage rate of *point* (Martineau 2005).

Are these writers who held on to the usage of *point* the same ones who used the *oi* variant? Is there a connection between using a conservative spelling variant and using a conservative grammatical variant? If we compare the behaviour of the writers in their usage of *ailoi* in Table 1, results repeated in Table 2, and their usage of *pas*/*point* in Table 2, we see that there is a gap in usage.

**Table 2. Rate of use of the innovative (*pas*) variant versus the conservative (*point*) variant.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writers</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of <em>pas</em></td>
<td>57.3% (26/463)</td>
<td>57.6% (34/59)</td>
<td>66.6% (10/15)</td>
<td>83.3% (5/6)</td>
<td>88% (46/59)</td>
<td>42.8% (6/14)</td>
<td>64.3% (18/28)</td>
<td>0% (0/5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of <em>ai</em> in contexts other than people names</td>
<td>0% (0/43)</td>
<td>0% (0/3)</td>
<td>0% (0/22)</td>
<td>68.1% (15/22)</td>
<td>0% (0/7)</td>
<td>31.5% (25/80)</td>
<td>0% (0/51)</td>
<td>0% (0/23)</td>
<td>30.4% (14/46)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writers</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>14</th>
<th>15</th>
<th>16</th>
<th>17</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of <em>pas</em></td>
<td>93.7% (15/16)</td>
<td>70% (7/10)</td>
<td>76% (19/25)</td>
<td>100% (8/8)</td>
<td>86.6% (13/15)</td>
<td>91.3% (21/23)</td>
<td>70% (7/10)</td>
<td>0% (0/3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of <em>ai</em> in contexts other than people names</td>
<td>90% (9/10)</td>
<td>100% (14/14)</td>
<td>24.4% (21/86)</td>
<td>0% (0/18)</td>
<td>0% (0/15)</td>
<td>0% (0/27)</td>
<td>0% (0/15)</td>
<td>0% (0/5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* No rate is given when there are fewer than five occurrences.

In general, the innovative variant is much more obviously adhered to for the grammatical variant than for the spelling variant; many writers have integrated the new usage of *pas* well, but use of the *ai* variant is
slower to come about. This divergence could be due to the fact that usage of *pas* rather than *point* was not an important linguistic issue among grammarians as it was rarely mentioned in grammar books. However, the spelling norm — *oi* or *ai* — was debated and the position of the Académie, through its Dictionary's editions, was clearly stated. A good knowledge of spelling implies a formal education; the usage of *oi*, even if it was in regression for higher class writers in France, might have been seen by New France writers as closer to the Académie’s norm.

In 1763, New France was conquered by the British. The isolation that followed, according to Poirier (1994), was the source of the progression of archaisms in Quebec French. Regular exchanges with France did not begin again until the middle of the 19th century. The French Canadian upper class gradually became aware of the gap that had grown between Canadian French and European French and tried to strengthen these ties once more.

Did the isolation brought about by the British Conquest help maintain the conservative spelling variants in Canada, while the innovative spelling variants progressed in France (in all social classes, according to Dubois 2003) and were even approved by the Académie? I have distinguished two groups of writers: those born in the St-Lawrence Valley (today’s Quebec), and those born in the region of Detroit (today’s south of Ontario), which was much more geographically and politically isolated. For this period, the corpus also shows a marked social class distinction in the St-Lawrence Valley between the upper class and the working class. In the Detroit region, this distinction was much more difficult to establish. There was a French upper class made up of fur merchants that gained wealth in the middle of the 19th century, but this upper class was much more recent than the one in the St-Lawrence Valley.

Table 3 shows that the conservative *oi* variant has a tendency to be maintained for certain writers born between 1750 and 1850, but that there is much more variation. However, there must have been a certain prestige associated to it because it still shows up in 1840 in the writings of Amélie Panet (writer 22), *amie des lettres* and a member of literary clubs. We can feel the weight that this old spelling variant must have had because it is one of the only archaisms that this writer uses. For example, she systematically writes modern variant *i*, instead of *y*, at the end of words like *lui* and *si*.

Even writers from lower classes born at the beginning of the 19th century adhered to the *ai* usage, as shown in Table 4.

This general tendency for St-Lawrence Valley writers to move towards the norm prevailing in France is also apparent with the use of *pas* and *point*. All social classes considered, the use of *pas* predominates in non-partitive contexts for writers born at the end of the 18th century or in the first half of the 19th century, as shown in Tables 5 and 6.
Table 3. *Rate of use of the innovative (ai) variant versus the conservative (oi or e) variants in upper class writers born between 1750 and 1850 in the St-Lawrence Valley.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writers and birthdate</th>
<th>18 1752</th>
<th>19 1769</th>
<th>20 1772</th>
<th>21 1786</th>
<th>22 1789</th>
<th>23 c.1820</th>
<th>24 c.1840</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of ai in contexts other than people names</td>
<td>23.5% (4/17)</td>
<td>0% (0/19)</td>
<td>20% (2/10)</td>
<td>100% (42/42)</td>
<td>2.9% (1/34)</td>
<td>88.8% (8/9)</td>
<td>100% (11/11)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* No rate is given when there are fewer than five occurrences.

Table 4. *Rate of use of the innovative (ai) variant versus the conservative (oi or e) variants in lower class writers born between 1775 and 1860 in the St-Lawrence Valley.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writers and birthdate</th>
<th>25 c.1775</th>
<th>26 c.1820</th>
<th>27 1806</th>
<th>28 1820</th>
<th>29 1840</th>
<th>30 1860</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of ai in contexts other than people names</td>
<td>16.6% (1/6)</td>
<td>(2/3)</td>
<td>89.7% (34/38)</td>
<td>100% (6/6)</td>
<td>100% (26/26)</td>
<td>100% (16/16)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* No rate is given when there are fewer than five occurrences.

Table 5. *Rate of use of the innovative (pas) variant versus the conservative (point) variant in non-partitive contexts in upper class writers born between 1750 and 1850 in the St-Lawrence Valley.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writers</th>
<th>18</th>
<th>19</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>21</th>
<th>22</th>
<th>23</th>
<th>24</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of pas</td>
<td>83.3% (45/54)</td>
<td>100% (42/42)</td>
<td>94.1% (16/17)</td>
<td>87.1% (34/39)</td>
<td>91.6% (22/24)</td>
<td>71.4% (5/7)</td>
<td>100% (35/35)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* No rate is given when there are fewer than five occurrences.

Table 6. *Rate of use of the innovative (pas) variant versus the conservative (point) variant in non-partitive contexts in lower class writers born between 1775 and 1860 in the St-Lawrence Valley.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writers</th>
<th>25</th>
<th>26</th>
<th>27</th>
<th>28</th>
<th>29</th>
<th>30</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of pas</td>
<td>80% (4/5)</td>
<td>83.3% (5/6)</td>
<td>91.1% (226/248)</td>
<td>100% (61/61)</td>
<td>100% (44/44)</td>
<td>96.5% (82/85)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* No rate is given when there are less than five occurrences.

The region of Detroit, being more geographically isolated, adjusted less rapidly to changes in the norm and the innovative variants did not become used as easily. This is the case for the *ai* variant, and also, more visibly, for *pas.*
Table 7. Rate of use of innovative variants (ai/ï/pas) versus conservative variants (oï, c/ point) in writers born in the region of Detroit near the end of the 18th century.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writers and birthdate</th>
<th>31 1775</th>
<th>32 before 1772</th>
<th>33 1769</th>
<th>34 1791</th>
<th>35 1809</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of pas</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>83.3%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0/121)</td>
<td>(5/6)</td>
<td>(4/97)</td>
<td>(0/9)</td>
<td>(3/44)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of ai in contexts other than people names</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>66.6%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0/24)</td>
<td>(0/16)</td>
<td>(18/27)</td>
<td>(1/4)</td>
<td>(6/20)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* No rate is given when there are fewer than five occurrences.

By the end of the 19th century, the Detroit region adopted the norm of the St-Lawrence Valley, probably because of the large number of St-Lawrence Valley immigrants having moved there.

The oïlai and the point/pas variants both lead to the same conclusion: in the St-Lawrence Valley innovative variants were integrated more slowly than in France. This difference seems to be the consequence of the emergence of a local usage in a relatively geographically isolated context, rather than caused by differences in social class or less exposure to European French usage. This isolation is also the reason why conservative variants were maintained longer in the Detroit area than in the St-Lawrence Valley.

Was this difference enough for speakers in the Detroit area at the beginning of the 19th century to feel linguistically different from speakers in the St-Lawrence Valley? Based on the preservation of lexical archaisms and the introduction of neologisms or loanwords used to describe the region’s fauna and flora, several authors have proposed that French was so different in this area that they called it ‘français de la frontière’ (‘Border French’) (Johnson 1966; Halford 2003). The fact that there was also a usage gap between the St-Lawrence Valley and the Detroit region for the use of point/pas suggests that this may have been the case.

We saw that, starting at the beginning of the 19th century, there was a constant leveling towards a unique norm, with the consequence being that variation decreased as the norm became more and more stable. The next section will describe how the growing prestige of the norm — and how a fixed norm — had an impact on the use of non-standard variants.

**Outside the norm**

The creation of the Académie française in the 17th century started a major normative wave in France, reflected by the publication of Vaugelas’ grammar and the Dictionnaire de l’Académie française (Ayres-Bennett
2004). While the upper class was debating over the way French should be written and spoken, correct spelling became more and more prestigious. By the end of the 19th century, correct spelling had become an important social issue (Furet and Ozouf 1977).

When did this sensitivity to correct spelling become a social issue in the writings of our French Canadian writers? And has this sensitivity towards a spelling norm affected the selection of normative morphosyntactic variants? In other words, can writing well in the 18th century be defined the same way as in the 19th century?

In the 18th century, writing proficiency is almost certainly synonymous with the graphical form of letters — penmanship plays an important role in the teaching of spelling. When Mrs. Bégon writes to her son-in-law about her granddaughter, saying that *il ny à qua lescriture que nous avons de la paine* ("It is only handwriting that gives us trouble"), it seems that she is referring above all to her granddaughter’s penmanship, and not her spelling. The situation is the same for Mrs. Contrecoeur, who writes to her husband about their little girls:

(6) *tes petites filles qui arive de fair des visites on voulue*  
    *Ecrire dans malaître mais elle eoit avec leur corps*  
    *et avoit bien chant ce qui leur fait dire quelle on*  
    *bien malle Erite’*  
    ‘Your little girls, that have just come back from visiting, wanted to write in my letter, but they were in their undershirts and were quite warm, which is the reason why they wrote quite badly’

Should ‘writing badly’ be interpreted as not forming letters correctly, or as not having a good knowledge of spelling? In studying this aspect, I considered two very simple spelling rules: the agreement of the noun in number, and the past participle ending (ending in *é*) for verbs in the first group:

(7) *Les (petits) amis*  
    ‘The-plural little-plural friends’

(8) *Nous avons essayé* (as opposed to *essayer*, etc.)  
    ‘We-1st p. pl. auxiliary-1st p.pl tried-past participle’

In written French, the plural form of nouns and qualitative adjectives is generally marked with either an *-s* or an *-x* at the word’s end position. This plural mark in spelling is generally not phonetically represented. In (7), the *s* in *amis* is not pronounced whereas for the adjective, the pres-
ence of the s is sometimes pronounced with the liaison (petits-z-amis). Because of this phonetic difference, we focused on the spelling of number agreement on the noun only and on the presence or absence of the written s (or x) which reveals a knowledge of the underlying spelling rules of agreement in nominal phrases. In (8), the final /e/ of the past participle can be correctly represented as a past participle ending (é), or, wrongly, as an infinitive verb ending (er) or the inflection of the 2nd person of the plural (ez7) for verbs of the first group (ending in -er). In this context, I have not taken into account whether or not the agreement of the past participle was correctly achieved (e.g. ils sont allés; les pommes que nous avons mangées).

This section will examine what these non-standard spellings reveal about the relationship of writers with the norm, rather than the cognitive processes that could possibly be at the root of these spellings (see Desrochers, Martineau and Morin 2007; Chaurand 1989, 1992).

Table 8 gives the results for the 18th century writers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>80.3%</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>agreement</td>
<td>(42/84)</td>
<td>(1/26)</td>
<td>(14/28)</td>
<td>(0/28)</td>
<td>(8/64)</td>
<td>(15/92)</td>
<td>(24/32)</td>
<td>(45/56)</td>
<td>(35/141)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in number</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>40.7%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>past</td>
<td>(38/50)</td>
<td>(6/8)</td>
<td>(13/13)</td>
<td>(21/25)</td>
<td>(22/54)</td>
<td>(18/18)</td>
<td>(22/22)</td>
<td>(30/30)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(é)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>13</th>
<th>14</th>
<th>15</th>
<th>16</th>
<th>17</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>91.3%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>61.7%</td>
<td>96.4%</td>
<td>90.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>agreement</td>
<td>(0/22)</td>
<td>(2/22)</td>
<td>(38/50)</td>
<td>(21/23)</td>
<td>(16/16)</td>
<td>(21/34)</td>
<td>(55/57)</td>
<td>(29/32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in number</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>86.7%</td>
<td>96.9%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>94.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>past</td>
<td>(12/12)</td>
<td>(26/30)</td>
<td>(32/33)</td>
<td>(15/15)</td>
<td>(9/9)</td>
<td>(31/31)</td>
<td>(17/17)</td>
<td>(17/18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participle</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(é)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* No rate is given when there are fewer than five occurrences.

In Table 8, all writers have a good grasp of the difference between past participle ending and other endings. Only writer 6, a military whose level of education is unknown, has difficulty with this. However, knowledge of past participle ending is not generally sufficient to predict a general knowledge of spelling. Some writers who deftly grasped the dis-
tinction between past participle and infinitive endings had difficulties with the spelling agreement of plural nouns: this was the case for writers 2, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, and 11.

In the previous section, we saw that writers 4, 10, and 11 tended to use the innovative ai variant. It is therefore not possible to associate the ai variant to a high level of education in the upper class, as was possible for writers from Louisiana. In fact, the steadfastness of the oi variant suggests that this variant had a different value than the one it had in France. Writers 13, 14, 16 and 17 could thus represent an upper class model: the use of the oi variant in conjunction with perfect spelling in all other areas.

Writers with poor agreement number proficiency show weaknesses in most aspects of their spelling. Some features are clustering of words, truncation, major difficulties with lexical spelling of words, and incorrect verb inflection, as shown in the following examples:

(9)  ont fent défrais de fette  
     fa fent ce font toute sorte de coupon /  
     des poille toute rouy ez 7 père débas  
     drapé or de vente mangé des miste  
     'we would get rid of it this way, they are all kinds of samples, 
     rusted pans, seven pairs of socks with gold thread, and (the meaning of the word is unclear) eaten by moths' (writer 4)

(10)  ensain me voila biento a la fain  
      de mes paine je me réjouii de voir le prentan  
      'here I am finally almost at the end 
      of my problems, I am happy to see the springtime (arrive)' (writer 2)

Can we deduce from their limited knowledge of normative spelling rules that their usage of grammar will also contain features that are outside the norm? In other words, based on the hypothesis that these writers received little or no formal education, can we deduce that their writing contains traces of vernacular features?

One writer, Charles-André Barthe (writer 9), who was born in Montreal and traveled to Detroit regularly for the fur trade, seems to indicate that there may be such a parallelism. Barthe is not as well-known a fur trader as François Baby, who was also from Montreal and managed an extensive network of fur traders with his brothers and other merchants from Montreal. The winter diary Barthe kept resembles a travel journal and an account book (Bénéteau and Martineau 2006). It is in the diary of this merchant, who was educated enough to write but not so much
that his writings were dictated by the norm, that we find an example of a very vernacular expression, that of the verb *falloir* (‘to have to’ usually written with the impersonal pronoun *il*) with a personal subject: *ont fallut porté on fallu porter*, or ‘we had to carry’.

In order to analyse the potential parallelism between limited knowledge of normative spelling and use of vernacular features, I systematically compared the use of three morphosyntactic variables in the 18th century, shown in (11):

(11) Three morphosyntactic variables:

a. Absence / presence of the negative *ne*
   
   *Je ne pars pas / Je pars pas* (I don’t leave)

b. Variation between *je vais / je vas* in the first person singular of the present tense of the verb *aller* (to go)
   
   *Je vais partir / je vas partir* (I will leave)

c. Variation between *nous* and *on* in the first person plural, with restricted meaning
   
   *Nous allons partir / On va partir* (We will leave)

For all three cases in Modern French, there is a social class distinction for the variable, with the second variants in (11) being more colloquial than the first. The results presented in Table 9 show that the 18th century upper class in the St-Lawrence Valley clearly favored a standard usage of the variable. In the case of *ne*-deletion, the reason is probably that the phenomenon is not widespread, either in the lower or upper class. This is why *ne*-deletion is so weak in Table (9) during this period but also in 18th century literary parodies with colloquial speech representation (barely 1.4 percent) (see Martineau and Mougeon 2003). However, there is variation according to social classes for the two other variants, at least in France (Ayres Bennett 2004). As shown in Table 9, upper class writings contain mostly *je vais*, the variant *je vas* being associated with colloquial speech. Table 9 shows also the rate of use of *on* when the reference group is restricted. In such contexts, *nous* is the dominant form in the writings of upper class writers. However, this third variable, *on/nous* in restricted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>% of the non-standard variant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>ne</em>-deletion</td>
<td>0.5% (2/426)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Je vais</em></td>
<td>3.5% (2/57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>On</em></td>
<td>21.8% (29/135)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
contexts (for example, *On a reçu ta lettre*, ‘We received your letter’), is less stigmatized than *je vas je vais*. This less stigmatized use, although it was considered non-standard, may be explained by the fact that the use of *on* (vs *nous*) was increasing rapidly in another context, where the reference group is unrestricted (for example, *On a eu du beau temps*, ‘We had nice weather’).

Although upper class writings are clearly linked to use of standard variants, is there any trend for unskilled writers from this upper class to use more vernacular variants? Table 10 compares different writers’ use of two variants (*on/nous* and *je vas je vais* alternance) as well as the rate of successful spellings of the nominal number agreement (results from Table 8 repeated below).

Table 10. Rate of use of two morphosyntactic variants in upper class writers born in the first half of the 18th century in the St-Laurence Valley.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writers</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>% je vas</em></td>
<td>(0/2)</td>
<td>(2/2)</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>(0/9)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>(0/37)</td>
<td>(0/1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>% on</em></td>
<td>(2/3)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>14.2%</td>
<td>(4/28)</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>(2/50)</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>(72/430)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>% agreement in number</em></td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>16.3%</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* No rate is given when there are fewer than five occurrences.

Although there is not a large amount of data for each writer in Table 10, what we have is sufficient to state that we cannot generally rely on differences in spelling proficiency to predict the use of vernacular variant or not for 18th century writers. The rate of use of the *on* variant is similar in most writers, except writer 9 who, strangely, uses *on* very rarely.10 We cannot draw conclusions from the small number of occurrences of *je vas*; however, it is one of the writers with the weakest spelling proficiency, a merchant and interpreter, who uses the *je vas* variant:

(12) *je va ferre mes desvosition dan troi jour*

‘I will do my religious duties in three days’ (writer 2)

As we discussed, *ne* deletion is very rare in the 18th century. The only occurrences of *ne*-deletion we found in our 18th century writers’ letters are in writer 6’s letters who shows spelling difficulties:

(13) *cela nous avance pas.*
Whereas strong spelling proficiency allows us to label a writer as a member of the upper class and predict his standard usage of grammar, having a weak knowledge of spelling is not enough for us to label an 18th century writer as belonging to the lower class, and we cannot predict his usage of vernacular features. Nevertheless, if there are colloquial variants to be found in a text, it will most likely be in this type of document, showing non-standard spellings.

At the beginning of the 19th century, a greater sensitivity to the spelling norm appeared in the upper class. Table 11 shows that in the upper class born between 1750 and 1850 and who are writing at the beginning of the 19th century, the distinction of the past participle ending is perfectly assimilated and spelling agreement in number is also largely followed, with the exception of writer 20.

Table 11. Rate of use of spelling number agreement of nouns / rate of use of the past participle ending (é) in upper class writers born between 1750 and 1850 in the St-Lawrence Valley.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writers</th>
<th>18</th>
<th>19</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>21</th>
<th>22</th>
<th>23</th>
<th>24</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of agreement in number</td>
<td>100% (44/44)</td>
<td>62.5% (20/32)</td>
<td>25% (6/24)</td>
<td>97% (33/34)</td>
<td>95.5% (43/45)</td>
<td>100% (14/14)</td>
<td>100% (20/20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of past participle</td>
<td>100% (31/31)</td>
<td>100% (17/17)</td>
<td>100% (18/18)</td>
<td>100% (30/30)</td>
<td>100% (15/15)</td>
<td>100% (6/6)</td>
<td>100% (34/34)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* No rate is given when there are fewer than five occurrences.

As in the 18th century, these upper class writers also use little if any stigmatized grammatical variants, such as je vas, the on pronoun to refer to the first person plural or the deletion of ne, which began to progress during the 19th century.

Table 12. Rate of use of three morphosyntactic variants / rate of use of spelling number agreement of nouns in upper class writers born between 1750 and 1850 in the St-Lawrence Valley.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>20</th>
<th>19</th>
<th>22</th>
<th>18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of ne-deletion</td>
<td>0% (0/22)</td>
<td>0% (0/40)</td>
<td>0% (0/50)</td>
<td>0% (0/38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of je vas</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0/3</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of on</td>
<td>(0/2)</td>
<td>(4/4)</td>
<td>10.9% (13/119)</td>
<td>(2/6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of agreement in number</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>95.5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* No rate is given when there are fewer than five occurrences.
This greater awareness of the spelling norm created a gap with the lower classes. The progression of the prestige of spelling proficiency, coupled with access to formal education, had a tendency to dissociate upper and lower classes writings, as shown in Table 13.

Table 13. Rate of use of spelling number agreement of nouns / rate of use of the past participle ending (é) in lower class writers born between 1775 and 1860 in the St-Lawrence Valley.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writers</th>
<th>25</th>
<th>26</th>
<th>27</th>
<th>28</th>
<th>29</th>
<th>30</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% of agreement in number</td>
<td>70.5% (12/17)</td>
<td>18.1% (2/11)</td>
<td>34.3% (24/70)</td>
<td>9.6% (6/62)</td>
<td>87.5% (169/193)</td>
<td>87.3% (282/323)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of past participle</td>
<td>83.3% (5/6)</td>
<td>80% (4/5)</td>
<td>94% (47/50)</td>
<td>33.3% (7/21)</td>
<td>85.7% (24/28)</td>
<td>100% (20/20)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* No rate is given when there are less than five occurrences.

Writers 25, 26, 27 and 28, born before 1840, have weaker spelling proficiency. Even the distinction of the past participle ending is a problem for writer 28, who often uses the er ending instead of é ending (j’ai aimé).

In the 18th century, weak spelling proficiency did not allow us to make judgments on the sensitivity of writers to the grammatical norm; however, in the 19th century, weak spelling proficiency is often coupled with the use of non-standard morphosyntactic variants. For example, writers 27 and 28 exhibited a high rate of ne-deletion, of use of je vas, and use of on instead of nous for restrictive groups.

Table 14. Rate of use of three morphosyntactic variants in writers (27) and (28) in the St-Lawrence Valley.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writers</th>
<th>27</th>
<th>28</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ne-deletion</td>
<td>39.5% (102/360)</td>
<td>100% (15/15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Je vas</td>
<td>78.1% (25/32)</td>
<td>33.3% (2/6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On</td>
<td>31% (135/431)</td>
<td>80% (8/10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* No rate is given when there are fewer than five occurrences.

Of course, the rate of use of these variants in the text is not a reflection of their use in spoken language: there must have been a necessary gap between spoken and written language. Even so, the fact that these vari-
nants appear in the text reveals that the writer has a more flexible relationship with the norm. For writer 28, who was not a proficient speller, penmanship is still the key to communication. He criticizes his son, who has a very good grasp of spelling, for not properly forming his (alphabetical) letters: "jai une chause a te demander quand tu repondra tu tachera de formé tes lettre pour quon puis les lire, 'I have one thing to ask you, when you reply, make sure the writing is readable so we can read your letters'.

Writers 29 and 30 are both members of writer 28's family: 28 is the father, 29 is his wife, 20 years younger than her husband, and 30 is the couple's child, who was 20 years old when he wrote the letters. We have three generations (60, 40 and 20 years old), the younger two members born after 1840.11

According to Verrette (2002: 92), only 15.4 percent of Quebec's population was literate by the beginning of the 19th century. The industrialization of Quebec in the 1800s made it more and more difficult to live off the land alone, and several farmers left the country to settle in cities. From 1850 to 1900, the urban population grew from 15 percent to 36 percent in Quebec (Frenette 1998: 79). The new economic situation puts pressure on the majority of the population to seek an education, which in turn fosters the development of a permanent public school system (see also Charland 2005). Quebec's literacy efforts after 1850 resulted in the rate of literacy going from 26.7 percent in 1840 to 74.4 percent at the end of the 1890s (Verrette 2002: 92). Thus our three writers belong to three distinct groups: writer 28 was born in 1820, before the increase in literacy, writer 29 was born at the very beginning of the period of change and writer 30 was born during the period when the school system was developed.

As Table 15 shows, writers 29 and 30, members of the more literate post-1850 generation, were more sensitive to morphosyntactic variants belonging to the norm. These two writers were also proficient spellers.

Table 15. Rate of use of the three morphosyntactic variants in writers 29 and 30.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writers</th>
<th>29</th>
<th>30</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Ne</em>-deletion</td>
<td>12.8%</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10/78)</td>
<td>(28/141)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Je vas</em></td>
<td>(0/4)</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1/10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>On</em></td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2/8)</td>
<td>(0/32)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* No rate is given when there are fewer than five occurrences.
Is literacy the only factor that has an effect on their writing? In fact, the two writers were both fervent ultramontanes like most of the upper class of that period. Both of them read ultramontane newspapers frequently, and the son even incorporated an extract from a newspaper directly into one of his letters:

(13) a. Onésime Jr.
«l'influence que l'introduction / des capitaux français parmis / nous ne manquera pas de donner / à l'Élément franco Canadien un / nom qui va aller toujours de / mieux en mieux»
‘the influence of the introduction of French funds will without a doubt give French Canada a name that will not cease to improve’

b. Opinion publique newspaper, Sept. 10 1880
«L'année 1880 fera époque dans les annales de notre histoire. L'amélioration des affaires à laquelle la protection a dû contribuer, en partie du moins; l'établissement de relations financières avec la France, la fondation de l'industrie sucrière, l'exploitation de nos mines, la création d'un grand nombre d'industries, l'influence que l'introduction des capitaux français parmi nous ne manquera pas de donner à l'élément franco-canadien (...) voilà autant d'événements dont le pays peut à bon droit se féliciter.»
‘The year 1880 will go down into the annals of history. The improvement of business, at least partly helped with an increase in security; the establishment of financial relationships with France; the successful development of the sugar industry, our successful mining operations, the creation of a large number of industries, the influence of the introduction of French funds which will without a doubt give French Canada (...) these are accomplishments the country should be proud of.’

This adherence to the values of the French Canadian upper class (the presence of the clergy in the political sphere, as well as the choices of standard linguistic variants) by these two lower class writers is very likely related to the importance they give to spelling proficiency, which is part of the identity of the Quebec bourgeoisie in the 19th century.

This leads us to wonder if this value is shared by the developing upper class, to the west of the St-Lawrence Valley, because, as we have seen in the preceding section, this region seems to integrate changes in the norm more slowly, being isolated from Quebec. The importance attached to standard spelling as a social value seems to have happened at a much slower pace in the region of Detroit, even in the upper class. And this is probably why we can still find, in 1818 upper class writer 33, sentences
as in (14), with no nominal agreement in number and incorrect past participle endings:

(14) C est avec douleur est *truste|ses que Je vous Informe de L'Accidents quil est Ariver a notre cher Fresre Denis Jeudis dernier a Midis Il etoit coucher dans fon Lits

‘It is with pain and sadness that I inform you of the accident that our dear brother Denis had at noon last Thursday, he was lying in his bed’

**Conclusion**

Before the spelling norm was well established, the upper class in France and in its colonies did not seem to behave as a linguistically uniform group. While in France and Louisiana, the innovative *ai* was progressing according to Dubois, we found that in New France it was the conservative *oi* variant that was more common. This upper class conservatism, also displayed in a certain degree in the use of *point over pas*, diminished with the increased prestige of the norm; spelling proficiency as well as observance of the norm in France became more important social issues for the French Canadian upper class. The region of Detroit, however, being more isolated, integrated these new values more slowly.

The analysis of the usage of writers in the St-Lawrence Valley and in the region of Detroit allows us to better understand the benefits of studying texts of a private nature (letters, diaries) for reconstructing the older state of a language, as well as the social issues impacting writers. This paper suggests that before the 19th century, spelling proficiency was not a strong enough criterion by which to gauge the grammar of writers. Writers strayed from the spelling norm, but without revealing much of the vernacular. In fact, from a linguistic change point of view, spelling errors in 18th century writings reveal very little about speakers' grammar, since these speakers may either follow the norm or not.

And herein lies one of the greatest challenges of historical linguistics: reconstructing a vernacular language from a time when those who spoke this language could not write it or (if they could) only left very disparate records, if any (short letters, receipts). Yet some of the 18th century texts from upper class writers or even middle-to-upper class writers reveal a grammar with colloquial features, especially if these colloquial variants were not very stigmatised. The global perspective of historical sociolinguistics acknowledges the contribution of the upper and middle class speakers to linguistic change; in this light, upper and middle class writings help us to better understand social dynamics by the presence, or absence, of variants.
The development of the school system caused a major change as far as the presence of colloquial features in writing is concerned. The lower classes found a voice in writing for the first time through an increase in literacy. As more lower class speakers started to learn how to write, they left more texts and gave us a glimpse of the vernacular and the dynamics of linguistic change that were previously only voiced through the upper and middle classes.

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Notes

1. This article has been funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (MCRI project Modelling Change: The Paths of French, directed by F. Martineau; project Évolution et variation dans le français du Québec du XVIIe au XIXe siècles, France Martineau (director), Alain Desrochers and Yves-Charles Morn.


3. In the 17th and 18th centuries, New France covered a large region, from Canada to Louisiana as we know them today. After the British Conquest in 1763, New France was restricted to what is now called Canada.

4. The level of formal education of many of our writers is not known, given the difficulty in finding sources for that aspect.

5. Despite having gone through a large number of documents, I found that certain writers still used the variant only very few times, if any. The decision to study individual writers, which was necessary to understand the dynamics of the social group, resulted in some dispersion of data.

6. Variation between *pas* and *point* is tangible through corrections writers made, as in the following sentence: lés a bitsans ne save point pas de quel paroisse (the settlers do not know from which parish …’) (writer 6).

7. In the 18th century, it was also possible to spell plural past participles with an *ez* ending; therefore, I considered that writers using this ending for plural past participles were not making an error with regard to the norm.

8. The pronoun *on* can refer to either a group excluding the speaker (*on m’a donné un cadeau, ‘they have given me a present’), a group including the speaker but so wide that the speaker does not know each one (*on a du beau temps, ‘we have nice weather’) (unrestricted meaning), or to a group including the speaker in which the speaker knows everyone (*on est allés au cinéma, ‘we have gone to the cinema’) (restricted meaning). In this paper, I only studied the variation between *on* and *nous* for this last meaning.

9. Results in Table 9 are from Martineau and Mougion (2003) for deletion of *ne*, Martineau and Mougion (2005) for *je vais* and King, Martineau and Mougion (2005) for *on/nous*. However, in this paper, I examined a much larger number of writers and data and I followed each writer individually to analyse the sociolinguistic interaction. Thus, the results in other tables come from this present systematic study.

10. The style of the travel journal may have had an effect on the more frequent use of the *nous* variant.

11. See Martineau and Dionne (2007) for an analysis of the education these writers could have received.
References


King, Ruth, France Martineau, and Raymond Mougenot (2005). J’allons/Nous allons/On va: l’emploi du pronom de la première personne du pluriel en français diachr-
ronique. Talk presented to the International Conference Les variétés des français parlées en Amérique du Nord, Université de Moncton: Moncton.